

## **Health and Healing through Water**

Water has tremendous healing potential for the human mind, body and spirit. Water can physiologically and psychologically benefit people because of its therapeutic nature. For thousands of years it has been known to help cure illness, refresh the body and relax the mind. Since those ancient times water has been one of the most effective elements in combating illness and injury. Hydrotherapy, or water treatment, can combat many diseases or ailments, but it can also be a quick, easy and affordable way to relieve a little stress. As the most abundant resource on this planet, water should still be used for its ability to cure and help people in these times. Despite technological and medical advances of recent centuries does water still have the capacity to effectively promote good health and healing naturally?

Water is the cheapest and most abundant resource we have because it can be found nearly anywhere on the planet. The United States Geological Survey estimates that nearly seventy percent of the surface of the earth is covered with water. It also falls regularly from the sky in various forms of precipitation over most of the land. Water is a necessary ingredient for any living being on this planet. The Web MD Medical Library states that the human body is between 60 and 70% water, therefore, it is logical that water would be a key factor in restoring the health of people. Most of human civilization can be found near lakes, coasts, river banks or other places in close proximity to a plentiful water source. Water is necessary for human survival but as you will see water also has the power to heal by the way it looks, sounds or feels, too.

People can facilitate hydrotherapy in numerous ways, the most important of which is to consume clean and clear water. The old health class adage still holds true that an average person should consume about eight glasses a day of water to promote a healthy lifestyle. Soaking in water has many beneficial aspects as well, from relaxing to refreshing or restoring health. People have been aware of the healing nature of 'taking the waters' from ancient bath houses to modern hot tubs. The acronym 'SPA' is an abbreviation for the term "solus par aqua" which means health or healing through water. The bath houses were used to restore health and rehabilitate injuries, much in the same way that exclusives spas do today. Water soothes the soul because the tranquil sounds of moving water can be meditative. Each person can hear their own music in the rush of the

water. Recreating on bodies of water can be therapeutic to the human psyche because it put us back in touch with the balance and beauty of nature. There are many other ways to use water as an effective device to improve your health or reduce your stress, including showering, steam baths, and in-water exercise or localized water pressure treatments.

Hydrotherapy has many positive effects on the human mind. Steam baths ease the mind because they cause a person to sweat out toxins which target the brain and can alter mood, thinking and behavior. Neuro-toxicity can increase a person's likelihood to get cancer, so it is important to remove toxins often. A person is able to sweat out up to thirty percent of their bodily waste which will release many of these toxins through the skin via sweat glands. (Kline) This will lead to improved mental clarity and a better sense of being and is akin to receiving the positive side effects of exercise without the hard work. My first encounter with a steam, this summer in Budapest, was a very enjoyable experience. I was very clear headed after the steam and I felt lighter and more energized than I have in years. Another way hydrotherapy affects the mind is by calming the body which in turn will reduce the action of the brain. Sitting in warm or hot water can relax the central nervous system allowing your mind to relax for a while. This reduces the pain signals sent to your brain via your nervous system which temporarily relieves a person from chronic pain. Reducing chronic pain helps to reduce anxiety and the likelihood of depression. Sitting in cool water or taking a brief cold water splash is also good because it acts as a tonic for your mind by stimulating your muscles and increasing blood flow and oxygen to your brain (Buchman 67-80). For these and other reasons it is clear that water can have a benevolent impact on the mind.

Treatment with water can help promote good health through the body in many ways. Water acts as a catalyst to help heal different ailments when used or applied in the proper manner. Ice can prevent inflammation of joints and it also reduces swelling after an injury. Bathing or soaking in water can have many different positive effects on people's health depending on the temperature. Hot tubs or whirlpools are common remediation tools for injury rehabilitation these days. As mentioned, warm or hot water relaxes muscles, but increases the flow of blood, which speeds oxygen and nutrients through the circulatory system. A hot bath can also alleviate pain, eliminate fatigue, reduce muscle spasms, induce perspiration, relieve internal congestion and relax the

body. A hot bath will sedate the body and eliminate toxins through pores. (Buchman 70). A hot tub session will reduce the friction on joints which can benefit arthritis sufferers. Also, heat effectively lowers blood pressure by dilating blood vessels. Hot baths should be brief because they can deplete energy if they are longer than 15 minutes, while cold baths should be even shorter, about 2 or 3 minutes, or less depending on tolerance. Cold baths have several other positive effects like lowering extreme fever from disease or heart attack, and increasing energy level. A cold water bath also stimulates the body, promotes resistance to disease and increases vitality. Polar Bear Clubs all claim that they jump in nearly freezing water because of the exhilaration that rushes over them. One would be wise not to try to prove them wrong, unless they want an invigorating experience.

Water has a unique ability to lift the spirit of people. Perhaps it is because of all the ways that it can restore and refresh the mind and body, but it seems to be more than that. Surfers and sailors are often quoted as saying that there is something spiritual about being out on the water. The tranquil sounds of moving water and the beauty and serenity of bodies of water are compelling reasons to leave your other thoughts and worries behind. Flowing water has a calming effect on people, because of the soothing sound of rushing water. Some religion finds the white noise in moving water to be meditative and relaxing. A western novel, *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse, written about an eastern religion, Buddhism, has the main character finally achieve enlightenment from letting the sounds of a river wash over him bringing inner harmony. The river was the place that the title character found peace and balance after a life long journey to free his spirit and gain wisdom. Although most people may not have this kind of life altering encounter with rushing water there is no reason that one should not be uplifted by the harmony and beauty of the sound of rushing water.

Water's healing capacity as a medical treatment is well-documented historically. Hippocrates, a Greek physician known as the father of modern medicine, was "one of the first to state that nature should be used to heal the body" (Buchman 67). It should be no surprise that Hippocrates was a strong advocate of baths as medical treatment nearly 2500 years ago. Although many spa's or bath houses are culturally thought to be first and foremost places of social gathering, their original intentions were as places of healing and cleansing. Physicians often worked in bath houses to administer days of treatment to

sick patients and give professional advice to those with less significant maladies. Treatments varied depending on condition and ailment. The bath house or spa offered a variety of options for healing such as hot or cold water baths, sea or mineral water treatments, showers, steam and sauna rooms, imbibing fluids, or exercise and therapy in the waters. Many of the illnesses and injuries that prevailed from ancient times were cured or assuaged with ‘the waters.’

It is troubling that water cures have fallen out of favor in recent centuries. One reason for the decline of hydrotherapy was the religious perception that bath houses should be taboo. At different times in the last five hundred years, churches of many cultures have yielded considerable influence on the public by declaring that cleansing oneself with others is dirty. Not all of this sentiment is without merit because some of the bath houses were reputedly licentious and had openly promiscuous behavior in these public places. Another reason for the decline in water cure is the so called improvement in modern medicine. Although drugs and modern medicine have cured many diseases there is still thought among many doctors and physicians of today that more natural and affordable cures exist via options like hydrotherapy and holistic treatment (Porter vii-xii). As Porter states, “Few regular physicians these days make much of hydrotherapies... (perhaps because) today’s medicine and its devotees seek therapeutic agents and regimes more potent than water...” (vii). Water has the ability to restore health in a natural way which can balance out many necessary human functions, whereas medicinal treatment often looks to fix an ill by introducing artificial support to the body. In this manner many of the water treatments listed here have a holistic approach that is better for the long term health of a patient. Plus water-cures are often much more affordable than drug treatments. At the turn of the last century many physicians still studied water cures for their benevolent power, but today hydrotherapy is often overlooked in lieu of other more costly or more invasive treatment.

Public bath houses have fallen out of favor in much of the civilized world because of the previously mentioned reasons. They still exist, however, in many places especially in parts of Europe and Asia. I had the good fortune of visiting bath houses in Scandinavia and the one in Budapest, this past summer. Although I was not ill or injured at the time of my visits I can certainly attest to the fact that my general spirit and well-

being was boosted by my mornings in those spas. I left each spa with a boost of energy, enlivened spirits and a lack of my typical morning nasal congestion. I felt wonderful all day after each trip and was amazed at my ability to breath deeply afterwards without any trouble. Back in the North American continent where spas are more commonly private resorts or exclusive clubs it is encouraging to know that more people buy hot tubs or whirlpool baths for their homes each year since the inception of a jetted tub in the 1960's. Still, until these are widely accessible to all citizens most people will not have the experience of receiving the wonderful therapy that a jetted tub can provide. In fact most people's experience with hydrotherapy today is limited to a ten or fifteen minute shower in the morning. Although this is highly beneficial, it is a hardly a way to leave worries behind and is not as effective at providing therapy as a bath or soak in the manners detailed above.

It is sad that people spend more time and money each year searching for remedies to many health problems that can be fixed or mollified through a natural process of hydrotherapy. Some of the common conditions and ailments that hydrotherapy has been known to improve are acne, arthritis, asthma, back problems, colds, constipation, coughs, cramps, digestive problems, flu, food poisoning, headaches, infection, insomnia, nervousness, poison oak, sinuses and sore throats. This is just a small portion of a much larger list. Hydrotherapy can also help ameliorate or relieve the conditions of more serious ailments such as chronic fatigue syndrome, diabetes, heart problems, high blood pressure, pneumonia, and shingles among others. On a less serious note, hydrotherapy is beneficial for the skin and can help lead to weight loss. Drinking water is the best way to achieve these desired conditions. Generally speaking hydrotherapy is very good for the human body, mind and spirit.

Over the past few years I have been fortunate to experience some of hydrotherapy's wonders. I live in an area where many of my neighbors live in houses on the Willamette River. It should come as no surprise to the reader that when I first moved in there were two ladies in their nineties on one small block. The elder turned ninety nine years old before passing away. Her daughter, who is now in her upper seventies, still lives in the house on the river that she shared with her mom for almost forty years. The daughter always says that it is very peaceful to live by the river, which is probably why

her mom lived so long. I believe it whole heartedly. I would like to add that a different neighbor had a cat that lived for at least twenty six years, with the latter ten being spent at the house on the river. Maybe it is just water that is in the fabled fountain of youth.

In a Brother's Grimm tale, The Water of Life, three sons of an ailing king set out to find an elixir known as the water of life to save their father. The youngest prince finds this water and is able to save the king. Although water is not that quick in its healing powers the title of the tale and the moral of the story is surely an appropriate one. The water of our life is an abundant resource that should be studied and advanced for the sake of modern medicine and healing. For the future health of humanity water is a wonderful weapon against ailments of the body mind and spirit.

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